

Profile: Pat Moylan

The extraordinary life of a paediatric neuropsychologist and adoptive single mom

By Suzanne Boles

Talking to Dr. Pat Moylan for the first time is like meeting a good friend over coffee. She is open and honest. In fact, her candour can even catch you off guard. Like when she talks about her decision to adopt two children as a single parent. "If you want to grow up and have a whole lot of money then don't have kids," she laughs. "But if you want to be a parent then, just do it. In fact, that pretty well sums up what Moylan's life has been all about: *If you want it, then go after it...just do it.*

Any topic of conversation with Moylan is upbeat and peppered with what she calls the trademark Moylan sense of humour. "We have this good sense of humour that isn't good enough to make any money off of." It's easy to presume that this might surprise some people. Many would consider her work as a Paediatric Neuropsychologist to be emotionally daunting, but Moylan doesn't see it that way. Helping families of children with head injuries or other brain abnormalities at Children's Hospital of Michigan is more than a job. It's a strong commitment, like the desire to include children in her life wherever, and whenever, possible. But having a good sense of humour, coupled with strong family bonds, helps her through those personal periods of challenge.

From the day she was born, family bonds have shaped Moylan's life, been there to comfort her, and given her purpose and direction. Born and raised in Detroit, Michigan, Moylan is third eldest in a family of seven children. Her father, now retired, was a family doctor, as was his brother and their two cousins. Moylan's mother was a homemaker and returned to school later in life, receiving her degree in social work when she was in her early 60s.

"My parents are very, very good people," she says. "Their moral compass is right on target. I think the good person in me is the good person in my mom. She taught us to be good people."

Dad's brother's family lived close by so between the two families there were 16 Moylan kids in the neighbourhood. In total, there were 54 first cousins. For most families, that would be enough, but not for this one. During the winter months they billeted Mexican exchange students. And later, when there just wasn't room for long-term visitors, they took in holiday foster kids who would come for a few days over Thanksgiving or Christmas. "We had a very strong family and religious, in the way of moral character and doing things for others," she explains.

Education was also important. The Moylan girls went to Immaculata, a renowned girl's Catholic school that has since closed its doors. The boys went to the University of Detroit Jesuit High School and Academy. And "it was pretty well expected that you'd go to high school and college." Her siblings include three engineers, an artist, businesswoman and a court administrator. A further testament to their close ties, all the siblings have settled in Michigan, including one brother who lived in Saudi Arabia for 13 years.

Moylan admits that she didn't know what she wanted to do when she went to university. "And then I went to a seminar in Montessori education and I was smitten by the whole philosophy. You allow the child to be the best judge of their own work and to learn on a developmental

continuum...it really creates an environment for children who are independent thinkers," not unlike Moylan's own strength of character.

For Moylan, working with children made sense. Like most young girls, her first job was babysitting but it wasn't about money. "Little kids always loved me. If there was a kid who was shy or wild they would gravitate to me and I'd have a lot of fun with them." When she was ten, Moylan and one of her sisters would round up kids from the neighbourhood, running an informal summer camp from their house. "We'd play games three days a week and charge the families a dime, but I'm sure my mom did ten times the work we did making the lemonade and doing other stuff," she jokes.

So when she heard about teaching, and the Montessori philosophy, it just all made sense. With a Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education from Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan, followed by a year of training in Montessori Education, she hit the ground running. The teaching was good, especially when it came to working with children on an individual basis. "I liked looking at their strategies figuring something out...My favourite time in teaching was working with an individual child on something and figuring out how their brain worked."

But even though the desire to work with kids burned hot, administrative red tape was beginning to overshadow the experience. After five years she took time off when a childhood congenital heart problem resulted in open-heart surgery. Then came "a broken heart from a broken engagement" and the decision to start anew.

Just like teaching, the inspiration came when it was needed. "I went to a class at Welsley College in math and they had a woman lecturing in Neuropsychology and, again, I was hooked on what it had to offer. I had a foundation in how kids worked as a group, and developmentally, and now the next step was to work with them one at a time."

This journey took more time and moved her away from home and family. She received her Ph.D. in Paediatric Neuropsychology from Boston University, followed by a year as a research assistant on a child language project, then four years at Harvard Medical Center completing her post-doctorate. She took a job in Northhampton, Massachusetts with an acute care head injury program for adults. However, "there were supposed to be kids there, but by law they couldn't have kids there, and after two years that was it. I didn't like working with adults exclusively. I wanted to work with children." So she returned to Michigan to be closer to her family. She took a job at Kingswood Psychiatric Hospital for a year, then found her niche at Children's Hospital of Michigan.

After 15 years Moylan is grounded in her career. Helping families and special needs kids is fulfilling. The first step is acknowledging that what's happening isn't their fault. There are a wide variety of needs, from memory problems to inappropriate behaviour so she works with them to find a way to help the child fit in. Her most recent success all around was a seven-year-old boy with a high IQ who was extremely hyperactive. At their wits end, his parents sought Moylan's help. She found him a public school that "has bent over backwards and accommodated the needs of this particular kid." The child is thriving and the parents are happier. It's a win-win situation for all.

In this example, and many others, the issue is safety. Peers or teachers shun many of these kids because their behaviour doesn't meet that exact set of acceptable standards. Parents who

come to her are worried because they don't feel their child is safe. Moylan rises to the occasion, moving with her heart, one that won't say no when it comes the needs of a child.

"The most important thing we can do for our kids in this world is help them feel safe. You can feel safe that I'll feed you, that I'll have a house for you, that I'm here for you. But you also want your kids to feel safe, that they can still make a mistake and their parents still love them."

Which brings us to Moylan and her kids. Now 49, Moylan's pride and joy are her children, Max Oliver, 13, and Hannah Marie, six. Moylan never married, a personal point of contention and a prime topic for her upbeat humour. So after searching for Mr. Right, and still not finding him, she decided to adopt Max, and later Hannah, both from Paraguay.

"When I was 33 I had been in a relationship for two years with a man who couldn't make a commitment, at least to me," she remarks with a laugh. "When I ended the relationship which, of course, broke my heart, again -- I've had several broken hearts -- I thought, I can't force or do anything about being a wife but I *will not* live without being a mom so I adopted a child. And that's when I adopted my son."

Max's adoption was fraught with some agonizing moments including the country's first coup in 37 years "so I didn't get him home until two days before he was eight months." The wait was excruciating with constant calls saying 'not yet' then 'yes' then 'no, not yet.' Oddly enough, the long wait provided her with some personal insight about her own strength of conviction as a mother. She recalls insensitive comments from those she counted among her friends as she politely fended off speculation that Max's mother might have changed her mind or the fact that they too were getting sick of waiting. As the days turned into weeks and months, the baby grew. Moylan found herself in the department store, returning clothes given to her at a baby shower, thrown by friends in May. She confided in the sales staff who were kind and supportive. When she finally brought Max home, the store was one of their first outings where she could show her new son to her new friends.

With Hannah, things went a bit more smoothly. Moylan had requested an older female child but there were none so she chose an infant, Hannah. At that same time, her close friends, Harriet and Jay Brown, applied to adopt a little boy. The paperwork coincided and they all flew to Paraguay together to adopt their new children.

But for Moylan, bringing Hannah home was when reality hit. Sleep deprivation from an overnight flight two young children and suitcases still unpacked "I felt tremendously overwhelmed." A feeling she admits to when the pace of parenting is at its peak, but parenting is like that, she says, matter-of-factly.

Her sister, Nancy, also adopted as a single mom. Lilly is from Guatemala, since Paraguay is now closed to adoptions. Moylan got involved with the director of the two Children's Homes in Antigua, Guatemala and flies down there every six months as a volunteer consultant for the homes.

On one of her trips she brought a wheelchair for a child with cerebral palsy. Once she took Max with her to see the ruins at Tekel and mother and son took medical supplies to a jungle hospital. She arranged to bring a little girl to Michigan for cardiac surgery. "The hospital donated all the services and, as it turned out, one of the nurses and her husband adopted the girl."

Moylan also fields questions from parents who are considering overseas adoptions. She consults with teachers in the learning center at her son's school about special needs children. And she volunteers with her son's Boy Scout troop.

Moylan is honest when asked if being a single mom is a challenge. "Oh my God, yes," she replies quickly. "I tell people it's not as glamorous nor as easy as it seems. My mom's motto always used to be 'one takes all your time. How can two take more?' My motto is, one takes all your time, two takes twice as much'."

Despite all of her amazing accomplishments, there is still a tiny, niggling voice that keeps telling her she should try to keep track of all the non-essential little details in her life like keeping a clean house or staying on top of her finances. She is also still looking for Mr. Right, a "soul mate" and a father for her kids. Everything happens when the time is right. And some things don't happen. That's all right too. What matters most to Moylan is that she's able to help kids and that she has two of the most wonderful children in the world.

As she chats about everything that's important to her, relaying this information with ease like good friends do, she summarizes her life, perhaps without even knowing she's done so. She refers to a plaque that she's got on the wall at home. She loved it so much, she bought one for her office.

"100 years from now, it will not matter what my bank account was, the sort of house I lived in or the kind of car I drove. But the world may be different because I was important in the life of a child."

Originally published in WOW Magazine. Copyright © 2002 Suzanne Boles. All rights reserved.